

People, Land & Water

Department of the Interior, OCIO, Enterprise Infrastructure Division

Expanding State Radio Communication Sharing Initiatives

By Christopher Lewis, Public Safety Communications Program Manager, U.S. Dept. of Interior

How can you expand your system, improve performance and decrease investment? Easy – collaborate. With declining budgets and increased need for interoperable radio communications to support public safety, national security and first responders, the U.S. Department of the Interior has taken the initiative to establish sharing agreements with state governments. These agreements allow state-owned radio systems to utilize federal radio channels. In return DOI employees use these radio systems to interoperate with other federal, state, local and tribal fire, law enforcement and emergency service users. At the same time DOI avoids the high cost of replacing and upgrading radio systems that can run into the millions of dollars. Many states have been able to expand their radio systems through grants from the Department of Homeland Security. This, in turn, has also allowed DOI to further reduce the number of radio towers it maintains while dramatically increasing coverage and interoperability for its field-based radio users.

For example, the Bureau of Indian Affairs leveraged the DOI agreement with South Dakota for its operations at Pine Ridge, Rosebud, Crow Creek, Lower Brule, Yankton, Sisseton and Cheyenne River reservations for more than 600 tribal and BIA radio users. South Dakota built a statewide system of 50 towers and three modern dispatch centers capable of supporting more than 12,500 federal, state, tribal and local radio users.

Reaction so far from the users of the state system has been favorable. “The system allowed us to communicate directly with our dispatcher at the fire station and coordinate first responder efforts,” said Keith Robinson, fuels specialist at the BIA Rosebud Agency. This is truly a new day for us in radio communications.”

On Nov. 18, Tony Kennedy, acting operations specialist (fire), Cheyenne River Agency, was able to monitor the state radio system while detailed to a fire in a geographic location that is known to have no former radio coverage. “I could talk on the state system and relay information like the person on the other end was sitting in my truck,” Kennedy said.



By leveraging DOI's radio-system sharing agreement with South Dakota, the Bureau of Indian Affairs has significantly increased its ability to communicate with law enforcement and others on reservations within the state.

The statewide system likewise has increased the capability for BIA's law enforcement Community. Lou Robinson, Criminal Investigations Division at the Sisseton Agency, indicated that on a recent high-speed vehicle chase across the county, he was able to communicate with agency, state and county law-enforcement officers through one radio. Robinson said he became the mobile command post by remaining networked through the state radio system. The offender was finally apprehended.

By utilizing the state radio system, interoperability with state and local first responders is built in. According to Jeff Pierce, South Dakota radio network engineer, the following federal users are currently using the system: FBI, U.S. Marshals Services, U.S. Fish and Wildlife enforcement units, Bureau of Land Management enforcement units, Bureau of Reclamation, National Parks Service fire units, Ellsworth AFB security units, Corps of Engineers security personnel, federal Forestry units, National Weather Service and Internal Revenue Service.

Scott Shields, chief of police, Office of Law Enforcement Services, Crow Creek Agency indicated that the communications network has been an "answer to prayers."

"We are able to communicate in places and ways that we have never had before," Shields said. "The ability for a law enforcement officer to operate outside of their vehicles allows for greater opportunities to provide support for the community while increasing officer safety. Recently, we were engaged in the search for a missing person, and I was able to park my vehicle in a strategic location and use the ... portable and BBM to maintain communications with the Crow Creek LE Dispatch. This minimized effort and maximized efficiencies." A BBM is a back-to-back mobile or, as more commonly known, a vehicular repeater system.

Shields also mentioned that the state radios allow for greater search capabilities for officers who are engaged in operations in and around the Missouri River. This affects missing persons operations and also drug trafficking surveillance.

Due to the success and benefits of using statewide radio systems, Hord Tipton, DOI's former chief information officer, signed an agreement on Oct. 3, 2006, with Montana and on Dec. 12, 2006, with Wyoming. In signing these agreements Tipton stated, "I am proud of the effort that my staff made to make this happen. This represents good government where public health and safety are enhanced and the taxpayers see



Interior enters into a radio-system sharing agreement with the state of Montana. From left, W. Hord Tipton, former chief information officer, Department of the Interior; Dick Clark, chief information officer, state of Montana; Cheryl Liedle, sheriff, Lewis and Clark County, member, Statewide Interoperability Executive Advisory Council.

effective use of their dollars.” DOI is working with other statewide systems as well, including Oregon, Washington, and Arizona.

“With the advances in radio networking technologies, as well as the ability of the state governments to utilize DHS grant programs to build statewide radio systems, the DOI can expand our partnership with the states to ensure that public safety and interoperability for DOI is a reality” said Timothy Quinn, chief, Enterprise Infrastructure Division. “By entering into these agreements, DOI becomes users of radio systems covering large geographic areas without having to invest in massive infrastructure as well as ongoing maintenance.”

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